

# Summer 2000 Sum Up

We've just finished our MLM group meetings for the summer of 2000. I thought I would take this opportunity to attempt to sum up in general terms how I feel about these meetings and about how we have been doing overall.

As always when we get together, I feel that I learned a lot. Moreover, we accomplished some things as a group, not only in getting the "letter to young revolutionaries" project launched, but in continuing to develop as a group ourselves. However, I don't think any of us are completely satisfied because we all know we should be further along in our development by now. So I'd like to discuss some of our weaknesses and float some ideas as to how we might make progress in overcoming them. The criticisms I am raising here are not directed at any particular person; they are general weaknesses of our whole group so far, including me.

## **Our Long-Time Lack of Group Discipline and Regular Mutual Struggle Shows**

Lenin once said that the initial reason for revolutionaries forming an organization or party was simply so that they would know who they could trust. But over the long term there are lots of other reasons too. One is that the discipline of a group (even one that has not formally adopted democratic-centralist rules) can help keep everybody focused and working hard on the most important political tasks. Another is that membership in a serious political group can and should promote political thinking, ideas, discussions, and struggle—from which a higher level of political and ideological unity should ultimately arise.

I feel that we have not been together as a group for long enough, nor had near enough meetings, discussions and struggle yet, to forge the kind of solid political and ideological unity that we would all like to see develop. In fact, to tell the truth, each time we get together there seem to be major new areas of disagreement coming up. Far from making progress toward political/ideological unity, it seems—on the surface at least—that we are becoming more ideologically disunified.

In past meetings some different and conflicting ideas about political economy came to light, and perhaps also questions of the mass line and how to do mass work in general. Before this last round of meetings Ted raised an important new issue around having multiple revolutionary parties, and I wrote a critical response. At the recent meetings themselves some apparent disagreements about revolutionary strategy and plausible scenarios for revolution arose, as well as an important new disagreement about the national question and how to deal with situations where national homelands have been swamped by the mass influx of people of other nationalities.

At this point I'm not terribly worried about this trend toward more surface disagreement because I think what is going on is just that many disagreements which were there all along are now coming to light as we have more thorough discussions and get to know better where everybody stands. In other words, this is surely a natural phenomenon for people who have had a long time to develop ideas on their own, and who haven't been meeting together regularly to hash things out and arrive at a common line.

But at the same time, this growing *recognition* of the actual differences among us does mean, I think, that we have to pay more attention to not just raising ideological and political struggle issues among us, but actually working more seriously to resolve as many of these issues as we can. Ideally, we will in the end arrive at a unified position. But perhaps in many cases the issues are not so pressing that immediate total unity is absolutely necessary. In these cases we will have to bring the differing positions fully to light and then allow each side in the debate to reserve their own judgment.

### **Our Infrequent Get-Togethers Mean We Must Have Many Email Discussions**

One reason we aren't making faster progress as a group is obvious—since we are so spread out geographically it is impossible to meet frequently. We've all recognized that this means we need to have more discussions via email. Once we all get set up to use PGP this should be more feasible and hopefully will really take off.

(Note about PGP: The recent flaw that was found in PGP shows once again that you can never be absolutely certain about any encryption scheme. However, PGP is still by far the best encryption method for us to use, partly just because it is constantly being examined by so many independent and knowledgeable eyes, who are more likely to discover and fix such flaws. I think it is a reasonable risk for us to make use of PGP to conduct political discussions and debates. However, it is probably quite unwise for anyone to communicate knowledge this way of anything *really* sensitive, for example something illegal they might hear about.)

Of course there are some potential problems with email discussions. For example, it will be more important than ever for each person to fully put forward their areas of agreement or disagreement with what others are saying. Email is a slightly less “human” form of communication than is a face-to-face get-together, and it is easier to not fully participate, to not bring up things as you would naturally tend to do at a physical meeting.

### **Our Meetings Need to be Better Planned and Organized**

When we do manage to get together, we must make better use of the time. Despite the fact that even unplanned discussions among us are generally valuable, it would be more valuable still if we had carefully planned discussions which we fully prepared for.

First, we should try to set the basic agenda via email *before* our meetings start—rather than wasting the first meeting itself doing this. Of course agendas can be modified if important new things come up, but in general we should try to have our basic agenda set *well beforehand*.

Second, we should try harder to get all the materials for such discussions distributed to everyone with plenty of time for people to read and consider them.

Third, we should all try really hard to read these discussion materials ahead of time, write up notes, and so forth.

Fourth, someone who feels competent to do this job (and this, alas, is definitely not me—I'm very poor at doing this for verbal discussions) should undertake to *summarize* these discussions in written form and make sure everyone gets a copy. Group summaries are important because of the

unfortunate (?) human tendency to individually sum up things in very different ways. If anyone disagrees with such a group summary it will probably indicate that further discussion of the topic should be held.

## **Our Discussions Themselves Need to be Better Organized and More Systematic**

All of our discussions, whether in meetings or via email, need to be much better organized and much more systematic.

First of all, many things are not being discussed at all, which should be. Sometimes we neglect to discuss entire topics which have been raised previously, and on which papers have been written and distributed. Perhaps these sometimes seem like “old news” which we’ve gone beyond. But until we collectively discuss them there is no way to know for sure. For example, in the months before our recent meetings Ted wrote a couple of papers, one starting to sum up the GPCR and the other focused more on the question of having multiple political parties. And I wrote up a response. But none of those papers were discussed at our meetings. Although some of the ideas in those papers came up obliquely in our other discussions, many of the issues raised went completely untouched on. This leaves me wondering where other people stand on the issues Ted and I raised. Do other people agree that multiple political parties are necessary and/or desirable? Do other people agree that factions should be allowed in the party, or do they disagree? I still really have very little idea what people think about such basic questions.

From such experiences I think we should sum up two important discussion principles for the future:

- 1) Major topics which have been raised should not just be dropped or forgotten, or merely discussed off-handedly. We should have some kind of reasonable group discussion of them (either in meetings or by email), and at least get to know what other people’s views are on the topic, what their arguments are, and so forth. Ideally, we should also have a group summation of such discussions.
- 2) All papers which group members write and distribute to the group should be discussed by the group (again, either in meetings or via email). Such discussions may often not need to be exhaustive or go on at great length, but people need to hear the opinions of others, get feedback, etc. Writing a political paper takes some time and effort and concentrates a person’s views. It is wrong to ignore such serious efforts.

Secondly, I feel that even when we do discuss a topic, or a paper or book, we have a tendency to do so unsystematically, focus only on a very few of the important points, ignore other important aspects, and often get off on tangents.

I felt this way, for example, about our recent discussion of the old “Organization for Revolutionary Unity” pamphlet “The Decline of the RCP”. At the beginning of the discussion Ted and others suggested several themes of the paper which we should address, such as: how to create public opinion, the single-spark method, the question of voluntarism, intermediate organizations, issues around the national question and the charge that the RCP is “Trotskyite”, and whether the RCP’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress was a turning point for the organization. We did talk about several of these points very briefly, but most of our ensuing discussion was focused on the national question, and especially on aspects of the national question considerably removed from anything in the ORU paper (e.g. Hawaiian sovereignty). Of course we should discuss the national question, and at length, because for one thing it is obvious that we have some very different perspectives and approaches to the topic. But it would seem to be best if the national question

were studied in its own right, more systematically, and on the basis of some collective reading—instead of backing into the issue in a big way on the spur of the moment.

Our discussion of the ORU paper turned out to be skewed and one-sided, and in particular did not at all get into what was the most important aspect of the paper. (At least for me, but apparently also for its authors since they put the topic first and devoted more space to it than to any other topic.) That is what Ted called the question of voluntarism, what the paper itself put under the heading “the mass line”, and what I would say should more properly be called “having a mass perspective” (which *includes* using the mass line). The central point here is the view that the masses become receptive to revolutionary ideas through their joint participation with revolutionaries in the masses’ own day-to-day (reformist) struggles. I really wanted to hear other people’s opinions of the ORU attack on the RCP in this regard because what the ORU says *on this issue* is almost exactly the same as my own position.

How can we keep our discussions more on track, and make them more systematic? For important planned discussions we have *in meetings* I think the answer lies in:

- 1) Having pre-planned discussions which we can all prepare for in advance.
- 2) Appointing a particular individual in advance to lead a particular discussion. This person would be responsible for gathering in advance the ideas from everyone about what the most important points to focus on are, drawing up an outline of these points, and making sure the discussion covers them and more or less sticks to them.

For *email discussions*, I think the answer lies in following the method used by Internet newsgroups. In each newsgroup there are postings on a variety of sub-topics, and responses from other people to many of these postings. These chains of postings, replies and replies to replies on any particular sub-topic, are called “threads” and are identified by the subject line. Often someone will branch off onto another related (or not so related) sub-topic, and that diversion will draw its own responses. At this point someone will usually suggest, quite appropriately, that a new thread be started on that new sub-topic, so that the old thread can keep going on the original issue. Perhaps, for long and involved email discussions, it might also be a good idea for us to appoint a “thread moderator” to help keep the discussion focused. Such a person might periodically sum up the various positions, for example, or lead the thread back to unresolved aspects of the matter at issue.

\* \* \*

Well, what do people think of these suggestions? Do other people have some different ideas? Our experience to date shows that our group does have some weaknesses in the way it has been functioning. But I think if we put our minds to it we can improve things considerably.

--Scott  
(8/30/00)